

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0911

INFO AMEMBASSY BONN

AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN

AMEMBASSY DUBLIN

AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE

AMEMBASSY LUXEMBOURG

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 03109

E.O. L1652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, PDEV, UK

SUBJECT: DEVOLUTION: GOVERNMENT DEFEATED ON TIMETABLE

REF: LONDON 2725

SUMMARY. THE CALLAGHAN GOVERNMENT SUFFERED A SEVERE
REVERSE WITH THE FEBRUARY 22 DEFEAT OF THE DEVOLUTION
TIMETABLE MOTION AND WAS SHAKEN FURTHER BY THE MAGNITUDE
OF THE DEFEAT -- 29 VOTES. ALTHOUGH NOT AN ISSUE OF
CONFIDENCE, THE NATIONALIST PARTIES IMMEDIATELY ANNOUNCED
THEIR INTENTION OF TABLING A NO CONFIDENCE MOTION. IT
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SEEMS UNLIKELY TO PROSPER. THE GOVERNMENT MEANWHILE HAS
BEGUN TO TAKE STOCK AND MUST CHOOSE AMONG THREE OPTIONS:
TO ABANDON THE DEVOLUTION BILL, CUTTING ITS LOSSES; TO
SOLDIER ON WITH THE BILL WHILE HOPING FOR A BREAK; OR TO
REVISE ITS STRATEGY IN AN EFFORT TO RECOUP ITS LOSSES.
THE COST OF THE DEFEAT IS STILL BEING COUNTED. CLEARLY
IT WAS A MAJOR BLOW TO THE REPUTATIONS OF LEADER FOOT AND

CHIEF WHIP COCKS AND DASHED LABOR'S ELECTION HOPES IN SCOTLAND. ALTHOUGH THE CONSERVATIVES HAVE REFRAINED FROM EXPLOITING THE GOVERNMENT'S WEAKNESS, THERE CAN BE NO DOUBT THAT IT IS NOW MORE VULNERABLE THAN IT WAS YESTERDAY, AND MORE DEPENDENT THAN EVER ON THE LIBERAL DESIRE TO AVOID AN ELECTION. THE ONLY WINNERS WERE THE NATIONALISTS, ESPECIALLY THE SCOTTISH VARIETY. IRRESPECTIVE OF THE BILL'S MERITS OR DEMERITS, THIS DEVELOPMENT WILL BE PERCEIVED IN SCOTLAND AS ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF ENGLISH INSENSITIVITY TO SCOTTISH ASPIRATIONS. THE BACKLASH IS EXPECTED TO BE SWIFT AND POWERFUL. END SUMMARY.

1. THE GOVERNMENT'S TIMETABLE MOTION ON THE DEVOLUTION BILL WENT DOWN TO IGNOMINIOUS DEFEAT FEBRUARY 22 AS 22 LABOR MPS VOTED AGAINST THE MOTION AND 15 OTHERS ABSTAINED. EVEN WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE 14 NATIONALIST MPS, TWO LIBERALS AND TWO ULSTER UNIONISTS, THE GOVERNMENT FOUND ITSELF ON THE SHORT END OF A 312/283 VOTE, LOSING BY THE SURPRISING MARGIN OF 29 VOTES. ALL CONSERVATIVES, INCLUDING FORMER PRIME MINISTER EDWARD HEATH, WHO HAD EARLIER APPEARED LIKELY TO SUPPORT THE TIMETABLE, DUTIFULLY ACCEPTED THEIR PARTY'S THREE LINE WHIP. THIS, TOGETHER WITH THE LABOR DEFECTIONS AND THE VOTES OF MOST LIBERAL AND ULSTER UNIONISTS, ASSURED THE GOVERNMENT'S DEFEAT.

2. WHILE THE OUTCOME WAS NOT UNEXPECTED -- BY FEBRUARY 21 THE EARLIER CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM OF THE GOVERNMENT WHIPS HAD EVAPORATED IN THE FACE OF HEAD COUNTS SHOWING

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THEY WERE FROM L TO 6 VOTES SHORT OF VICTORY -- THE MAGNITUDE OF THE REVERSE TOOK THE GOVERNMENT AND MOST OBSERVERS BY SURPRISE. THE GOVERNMENT, HOWEVER, HAD PREVIOUSLY MADE CLEAR THAT IT DID NOT REGARD THE TIMETABLE MOTION AS CONFIDENCE ISSUE, A CONTENTION THAT WAS DISPUTED ONLY BY THE NATIONALISTS.

3. FOLLOWING THE DEFEAT, GOVERNMENT MINISTERS QUICKLY RAN FOR COVER, REFUSING TO DISCUSS THE BILL OR ITS FUTURE. TORY SPOKESMEN ESCHEWED PARTISAN ADVANTAGE, AT LEAST FOR THE MOMENT, REAFFIRMING THEIR EARLIER CALLS FOR AN ALL PARTY CONFERENCE TO DISCUSS THE PARAMETERS OF A NEW DEVOLUTION BILL. LIBERAL SPOKESMEN ECHOED THIS SENTIMENT. SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY (SNP) LEADER DONALD STEWART QUICKLY ANNOUNCED THAT HIS PARTY WOULD INTRODUCE A NO CONFIDENCE MOTION, AN IDEA THAT WAS ENDORSED BY THE WELSH NATIONALIST PLAID CYMRU AND THE SPLINTER SCOTTISH LABOR PARTY (SLP). THERE WAS LITTLE RESONANCE ELSEWHERE, HOWEVER. IF INTRODUCED, SUCH A MOTION IS

UNLIKELY TO BE CALLED BY THE SPEAKER WITHOUT THE
ACQUIESCENCE OF THE GOVERNMENT; IF CALLED, IT IS UNLIKELY
TO PASS.

4. IT WAS SOON APPARENT THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD EITHER

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FAILED TO PLAN FOR THIS CONTINGENCY OR, IN THE EVENT,
THE MAGNITUDE OF THE DEFEAT MEANT ITS CONTINGENCY PLANS
WERE NO LONGER WORKABLE. WE UNDERSTAND THE CABINET WILL
REASSESS ITS DEVOLUTION STRATEGY AT ITS REGULAR THURSDAY
MEETING. IT CURRENTLY SEEMS TO HAVE THREE BASIC
ALTERNATIVES. IT COULD ABANDON THE BILL, CUTTING ITS
LOSSES AND OPENING THE WAY FOR OTHER IMPORTANT LEGISLA-
TION SUCH AS THE EC DIRECT ELECTIONS BILL. THIS OPTION,

HOWEVER, WOULD ENTAIL A HIGH POLITICAL COST IN TERMS OF ANTI-GOVERNMENT BACKLASH IN SCOTLAND AND WALES, RAISE
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QUESTIONS ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT'S ORIGINAL MOTIVES AND ALIENATE LABOR DEVOLUTIONISTS. ALTERNATIVELY, IT COULD PUSH DOGGEDLY ON WITH THE BILL AND HOPE FOR SOME "BREAK" WHICH MIGHT ALLOW THE BILL TO PASS. THIS OPTION WOULD ATTENUATE, IF NOT AVOID, MOST OF THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE FIRST OPTION, BUT VIRTUALLY PARALYZE PARLIAMENT. ITS IMPACT ON THE GENERAL PUBLIC, MOREOVER, WOULD BE NEGATIVE. A THIRD OPTION WOULD BE TO DEVISE A NEW DEVOLUTION STRATEGY DESIGNED TO BROADEN SUPPORT FOR A REVISED BILL. THIS COURSE OFFERS THE POSSIBILITY OF RECOUPING ITS LOSSES AND ALLOWS FOR A GREAT VARIETY OF TACTICAL APPROACHES -- ACCEPTANCE OF THE TORY ALL-PARTY CONFERENCE, A QUICK REFERENDUM, OR DEAL BARGAINING WITH BLOCS SUCH AS THE LIBERALS OR THE ULSTER UNIONISTS. BUT IT FACES TWO MAJOR CONSTRAINTS: THE LIMITED TIME REMAINING IN THIS PARLIAMENT AND THE "RAFT IN THE RIVER" PHENOMENON. THE LATTER LIKENS THE GOVERNMENT'S DILEMMA TO A CROWDED RAFT IN A RIVER; AS NEW PASSENGERS ARE PULLED ABOARD (NEW SUPPORTERS ACCOMMODATED) OTHERS ARE PUSHED OFF. ALTHOUGH NOT VERY PROMISING, THE THIRD OPTION WOULD APPEAR TO BE THE LEAST DAMAGING.

5. THE ULTIMATE POLITICAL COST OF THE GOVERNMENT'S DEFEAT ON THE TIMETABLE MOTION CANNOT YET BE TALLIED. THE DEVOLUTION BILL, IF NOT DEAD, IS CERTAINLY MORIBUND. THE REPUTATIONS OF COMMONS LEADER MICHAEL FOOT AND GOVERNMENT CHIEF WHIP MICHAEL COCKS HAVE BEEN SERIOUSLY DAMAGED. WE WOULD GUESS THAT COCKS, WHO HAS MISHANDLED SEVERAL IMPORTANT HEADCOUNTS SINCE REPLACING BOB MELLISH, WILL BE SACRIFICED AT THE FIRST OPPORTUNITY, THOUGH FOOT IS PROBABLY SECURE. MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, THE GOVERNMENT'S CREDIBILITY HAS BEEN SERIOUSLY UNDERMINED. EVEN THOUGH THE TORIES HAVE REFRAINED FROM EXPLOITING THE SITUATION, THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS NOW MORE VULNERABLE THAN IT WAS. WITH THE NATIONALISTS THRISTING FOR AN ELECTION, THE GOVERNMENT'S
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FATE IS EVEN MORE DEPENDENT ON THE LIBERAL DESIRE TO AVOID A GENERAL ELECTION. A DESIRE, INCIDENTALLY, THAT WILL DIMINISH IF THEIR STANDING IN OPINION POLLS CONTINUES TO IMPROVE.

6. THE OUTCOME OF THE TIMETABLE VOTE COULD HARDLY HAVE BEEN MORE SATISFYING FOR THE NATIONALISTS. REGARDLESS OF THE BILL'S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES, THE LOSS OF YESTERDAY'S VOTE WILL BE PERCEIVED IN SCOTLAND AS ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF ENGLISH INSENSITIVITY TO LEGITIMATE SCOTTISH ASPIRATIONS AND PERFIDY OF THE "ENGLISH" PARLIAMENT. THE SNP BELIEVES IT CAN TURN A SUBSTANTIAL POLITICAL PROFIT FROM THESE PERCEPTIONS, AND FEW WOULD DISPUTE THAT CONTENTION. INDEED, SNP SPOKESMEN HAVE ALREADY SAID THEY NOW HAVE AN EXCELLENT CHANCE TO GAIN A MAJORITY OF SCOTLAND'S 71 PARLIAMENTARY SEATS IN THE NEXT ELECTION AND THAT THEY WOULD INTERPRET SUCH A VICTORY AS A MANDATE TO SEEK INDEPENDENCE. THE OUTLOOK IN WALES, WHILE NOT AS STARK, IS SIMILAR.

7. WHILE HISTORICAL ANALOGIES CAN BE MISLEADING, IT IS DIFFICULT TO OVERLOOK CERTAIN SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE CURRENT SITUATION AND THE IRISH HOME RULE DEBATE DURING THE LATE 19TH CENTURY. THE RESOLUTION OF THE DEVOLUTION PROBLEM, HOWEVER, WILL NOT WAIT FORTY YEARS AND NEED NOT END IN AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND. NEVERTHELESS, EVENTS SEEM TO BE MOVING IN THAT DIRECTION.

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